

Leave No Trace?

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So, your rabbi has a sin to confess, on this Day of Judgment. This past June, on our trip to America, I committed what the United States National Parks Service considers a felony, though I was neither caught nor convicted. What was my crime? I picked up a small stone that I found along a trail David and I were hiking... and carried it out of the park. You're not supposed to do this, because you might disrupt the park's ecosystem. Because if *everyone* does this, then there'll be a problem with sustainability of the habitat, and erosion of the beauty that everyone comes for. This rule about rock removal is just part of an overall park ethic, called 'Leave No Trace,' which holds that as much as humanly possible, we are to *leave the area the way we found it*—there should be no *trace* of human existence in that area, and if this is unavoidable, then the signs of your presence must not be of a *permanent* nature. So not only must you take all your empty banana peels with you from your campsite, but you mustn't, say, etch your initials into a tree trunk. *Leave no trace*. This is so hard for humanity. We want to make our mark. We want something of ourselves to remain after we go. We want to *matter*, in the grand scheme. The 'Leave No Trace' philosophy privileges nature's eternity over our own, and that's not our impulse, so we need these rules to keep us in line.

Nowhere did nature itself conspire more against this human impulse—*this human striving toward permanence and consequence*—than at the Great Sand Dunes National Park in Colorado, another stop along our recent journey. On these surreal sand dunes the size of small mountains, the wind shifts constantly and forcefully, every hour covering up tourists' footsteps. It's not like a beach, where you can write your name or "Will you marry me?" in the sand and expect it to stay there long enough for you to snap a few photos. I tried writing my name in capital letters, but before I could even finish the word, the wind turned the L into an I, the O into a C. *This park doesn't need Leave No Trace rules; you couldn't leave a trace if you tried.*

As I stood on the dunes, only halfway up the mountain that I could not finish climbing; as my feet sank deep into the sand with each step; as the wind erased my name and its howling drowned out my voice... for the first time, in a long time, I felt utterly inconsequential.

Is this what the desert was like for our ancestors? Is this where the human impulse *to matter* was born? Is this why Abraham—who went forth from his father's house into the great sand dunes of biblical antiquity—soon after cried out to God for an heir? So that something of him would live on? So that his life wouldn't have been lived in vain, ignored by the universe, his name erased by the winds and sands of time? In despair, Abraham cries, *Adonai Elohim, mah titen li, v'anochi holech ariri*—"God, what can you possibly give me, since I walk along childless?" He laments that his servant will

be his only heir, his own name and gene pool lost to the universe in the very next generation. The thought of his impermanence tortures him.

God calms Abraham's angst by reassuring him that he *will* live on; that he'll have descendants to carry on his name, and his seed. "Look toward heaven," God tells him, "and count the stars. So shall be your offspring." Too numerous to count! And lest we think that children are the only means of mattering in this world, God goes on to promise Abraham land as a possession, an inheritance. The eternality of nature now *belongs* to people! *Our* people! We will no more be swallowed by the sands and erased by the winds. Inhabiting the Promised Land will become your people's destiny, the story goes, and it all will have started with *you*, Abraham. *Your* life will have consequence. *You* matter, in the grand scheme...

We long for this. A sense of purpose and impact. A sense that we're not just gone when we're gone, our being here having made no difference at all. We want to *matter*. To someone. To the cosmos. To history. To a community. We understand Leave No Trace, cognitively and ethically, but... *no trace at all?* Sure, some religions may cherish this as a value, but Judaism, not so much! We cherish the idea of *l'dor va'dor*, passing something down from generation to generation. We value *tikkun olam*, making the world a better place while we're here. We're taught that we are partners with God in the work of creation! It's... the *opposite* of Leave No Trace! Our faith is one of continuity and mattering. It's in our bloodstream.

A few years ago, I attended a conference for alumni of the Tisch Rabbinic Fellowship I was awarded in seminary. The Fellowship had funded my rabbinic education, and given us Fellows the opportunity to learn with a great visionary, Rabbi Larry Hoffman. It had introduced us to thought leaders thinking "big ideas" and doing church and synagogue differently, so that we too would learn to think big ideas into practice in leading our shul communities. It had arranged internships and professional coaching for us. The Fellowship was a gift beyond measure, and at this first alumni conference, we *finally* got to meet and thank our benefactor—a humble woman named Bonnie. Bonnie arrived in a wheelchair and took her place at our lunch table. Rabbi Hoffman asked us not only to offer her our thanks, but to each share a few words about how the Fellowship had impacted our thinking, our understanding of synagogue, and our congregational work. When the 16 of us rabbis finally finished this exercise, the room fell silent, until finally, Bonnie responded: "You know," she said, "I have a lot of money. But that doesn't mean I matter... Your group has given me a great gift today: Now I know I matter."

How will each of *us* know *we* matter—each of us in this sanctuary? What if we're not like Bonnie, with abundant wealth to invest in changing Jewish lives? What if we're not like Abraham, with the promise of ample descendants? Is it enough for us to just be beneficiaries and inheritors? To be the trace that someone *else* left on the planet? Can Judaism help *us* matter too?

I feel there's an answer in the Akedah, today's Torah reading about the binding and near sacrifice of Abraham's son, Isaac. There's an answer somewhere in the mystery as to why a man *so concerned* about the continuation of his lineage—why

Abraham, who *cried out* to God to *fix* the problem of his impermanence—would take his son up the mountain for slaughter. Aside from the act being unconscionable, it just doesn't *cohere* with Abraham's anguished lament that came before! How does this make *sense*?

Nobody can really answer *that* question—*why* he did it. But what I can tell you, is that the very mystery of that question has earned Abraham immortality and consequence. *Risking* his legacy in fact *preserved* it, for eternity. Because for generations we've all been trying to understand why Abraham would do such a thing, why God would ask him to, and why Isaac would go along with the plan. Ancient midrashim and medieval commentators each put their own spin on the story. Some say Abraham *told* Isaac that he was to be sacrificed, and yet the boy went forth willingly and with a cheerful heart, even helping build the altar. Some say Abraham *actually drew blood*, yet Isaac's soul was snatched up by heaven, so he could return to life after a time. The commentators' interpretations echoed what each generation of Jews needed to hear in their era: that martyrdom was noble; that the death of children was not their end; that devotion to our ancestors' faith would earn them eternal merit no matter how much persecution they endured by oppressors. The Akedah is a great story—and a great story speaks to *every* generation; Abraham's role in that story has made him matter, eternally. Every year on Rosh Hashanah, Abraham comes back to life and makes his mark on *our* lives. As Shalom Spiegel writes in his famous classic *The Last Trial*, "Once having entered the consciousness of their descendants, Abraham and Isaac never go away."ⁱ

What's the lesson in this? It's that if we, too, want to leave our trace; if we want *our* lives, too, to make an imprint on this world, we need only link ourselves to a great story—to become part of that story and play a role in it. Judaism offers us this opportunity. *We have* a great story. If we just take hold of it, eternity is ours! Contemporary author Ze'ev Maghen puts it this way: "*You personally* were born quite recently. You haven't existed, built, climbed, fallen, lost, won, wept, rejoiced, created, learned, argued, loved, and struggled for thousands of years. Nevertheless...[a]s a Jew, you are a distinguished member of a nation which has done all these things... If you reach out and grasp your people's hands—you *were there*."

If we reach out and grasp our people's hands, we were there! Yes, it's conditional; it's not that we get a free ride into eternity, just by *being* Jewish. *But...* if we *reach out* and connect with other Jews, and make this connection part of our life, we won't just make a few new friends, *we'll become part of a great story*. Our reach will extend back into history thousands of years, and onward into the Jewish future that *each of us* helps to write just by being an *active* part of it. On our own, when we ignore our connection to our people, Maghen says, we're like a leaf that doesn't draw any sap from the tree—from the branches, the trunk, and the roots. The leaf dries up; its life ends disconnected from the Source of life, while the tree itself lives on. *But* "if you reach out and grasp your people's hands," he writes, "You participated in what they did, in all places at all times. [Y]ou fought their battles, felt their feelings and learned their lessons. You... slaved in Potiphar's house with Joseph... sang in the wilderness with Miriam, and

toppled the walls of Jericho with Joshua; you carried first fruits to the Temple Mount, and... brought the house down on the Philistines with Samson... [Y]ou...danced before the ascending Ark with David...[and] went into exile with the prophet Jeremiah... [Y]ou hung your harp and wept by the rivers of Babylon; [Y]ou vanquished the might of imperial Persia with the wisdom and beauty of Esther... were with Judah the Maccabee at Modi'in, with the Zealots at Masada, [and] with Akiva in the Roman torture chamber; [Y]ou... philosophized by the Nile... with... Maimonides... were crucified for refusing the cross in the Crusades, and... exiled from the shores of Spain by Isabella... [Y]ou went out to Safed's fields to greet the Sabbath bride with Luria, and went in to Galicia's huts to seek the ecstasy of the fervent Ba'al Shem Tov; [Y]ou fled... across Russia's taiga, and were welcomed by [Emma] Lazarus at the gates of Ellis Island; [Y]ou filed into gas chambers... [and] parachuted into Hungary with Hanna Senesh... [Y]ou fought back at Warsaw... Throughout all this and so much more," Maghen says, "you were there with them – and they are here with you."

But that's not all. *You* get to leave a trace! If you grasp your people's hand, Maghen writes, and become part of this great story, then not only do you "partake in a four-thousand year-long journey," but also in "an adventure *recently rekindled* in a phoenix-like flash of incandescent splendour the likes of which human history has never seen." We're not just part of history, but part of a *rebirth*, and all that is to come for the Jewish people in the land of Israel and beyond. "You and I," Maghen reminds us, "are members of a unique, extended family, extended in *time* as well as in space, extended into the *future* as well as into the past." In every generation, we must see ourselves as if we *personally* left Egypt. We are invited to *become part of the story* by reaching out to connect with our people, and if we do, he says, "eventually you burn, my brother and sister...with the light and the fever and the strength and the passion of the magnificent and undying people of Israel, the bush that burns, but is never consumed."ⁱⁱ *Eternity*.

We can matter, eternally, if we only just reach out and grasp our people's hand. This is how we leave our trace. Not by etching our initials into a tree, but by connecting to our family tree—the Jewish people. This is how we write ourselves into the eternal story.

How do we begin? We take hold of the part of that family tree that is our Temple family. Thankfully, ours is an amazingly prolific patch of the tree, extending an abundance of branches to grab onto, any one of which will serve to connect you! There's the Boomers branch, for those who enjoy gathering for bush walks, discussions, and film nights. There's the Shabbat branch, for those who enjoy communal Friday night dinners, volunteering on the Kitchen Krew, celebrating simchas, or attending summer courtyard services. There's the education branch, offering Torah Study each week, Hebrew school, and Lunch 'n' Learns; and the Community Wellbeing branch, for those wishing to serve on our Care Team. There's our *tikkun olam* branch, for all who wish to help those in need or the environment. There's the arts branch, for all who sing or enjoy Israeli dancing. There are many more branches as well, from our Manna support group to our Kabbalah meditation group; from our Circle of Benefactors to our Capital Appeal; from our gardening team to our Teen Torah Tag Team. Each of these

extend to us a role in the ongoing Jewish story, by offering a connection to the “magnificent and undying people of Israel,” who are writing it still today.

Connection brings consequence. To matter in this world, we don’t need to *do* what Abraham *did* in the Akedah. We have only to become part of his epic story: the story of our people. So grab hold of a branch and join me in this age old Jewish felony, leaving your trace on the cosmos. Look toward heaven and count the stars. Look toward community and choose your way. Reach out your hand, in the new Jewish year. Eternity rests within your grasp.

Shanah tovah.

ⁱ Shalom Spiegel (2007), *The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice*, Judah Goldin, trans. (Woodstock: Jewish Lights, Original publication date 1967).

ⁱⁱ Ze’ev Maghen, “Imagine: On Love and Lennon,” in *New Essays on Zionism*, David Hazony, Yoram Hazony and Michael B. Oren, ed. (Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 2006).